

Teaching and Learning

Detlef R Prozesky
MBChB MCommH PhD
Professor of Community Based Education
Faculty of Medicine
University of Pretoria
South Africa

This article is the second in a series of eight, dealing with ‘Teaching Eye Health’. Almost everybody who is involved in community eye health is also a teacher - but many have never had any training on how to teach effectively. The aim of the series is to stimulate readers to teach and learn more effectively, and we will be working through important topics related to teaching and learning in a systematic and practical way. This article sets the scene by examining some important concepts related to ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’.

Words we use to Talk About Teaching and Learning

People use different words when talking about teaching and learning. Sometimes the same word will mean different things to different people, and sometimes different words will carry the same meaning. For example, Americans tend to use the word ‘evaluate’ to describe testing students to see if they have learnt, while the British often use the word ‘assess’. Here are some other examples of words with related meanings:

- ‘educator’, ‘teacher’, ‘trainer’, ‘tutor’, ‘lecturer’, ‘facilitator’
- ‘student’, ‘pupil’, ‘learner’, ‘scholar’.

What do these words mean to you? There will never be full agreement about the ‘real’ meaning of each of them. If people appear to misunderstand us, we have to explain what we intend them to mean.*

* Please also see the glossary compiled by Sue Stevens (page 31)

‘Learning’

All of us understand things in the light of our past experience. This is also true of ‘learning’ – we get our ideas of what ‘learning’ means from what happened to us in the past. So, for example, we may think of ‘learning’ as something which takes place in a school or college, in a classroom. We may think of it as a person sitting alone at night, trying to memorise a lot of facts so that s/he can pass an exami-

nation. However, a bit of reflection will show us that ‘learning’ is much wider than that. After all, children learn a great deal before they even get to school - they learn to speak, to walk. Educational psychologists tell us that any activity which leads to a change in our behaviour is ‘learning’.¹

Here are some more ideas about ‘learning’:

- Learning can be **formal** or **informal**. We learn informally from what we experience day by day: things which happen to us make us change the way we think and act. We may not even be aware that we are learning, which may cause problems - for example, health workers may learn bad attitudes from the example of others. Of course, learning may also be formal: we attend a course which is planned in a structured way, in a school or college.
- We don’t just learn **knowledge and facts** - we also learn **skills and attitudes**. This is especially important for health workers, since it is in our practical work that we have an effect on the health of the people we serve. Interestingly, we learn knowledge, skills and attitudes in different ways - for example, we may learn a new idea from a discussion, but we learn skills by practising them and getting feedback.
- **People learn in different ways**. Researchers have identified different ‘learning styles’.² Some people are ‘receivers’: they like to memorise what is given to them. This is a very common style, and it is reinforced by teachers who expect students to memorise, and reward them for it. Other people are ‘detectives’: they like to investigate what they are learning themselves, to get to understand it. Yet others are ‘generators’: they like to decide themselves what they want to learn, and then look for opportunities to learn those things.
- Learning can be **superficial** or **deep**.³ If knowledge is only memorised (*superficial* learning) it is soon forgotten, and may never affect the way that person does her/his work. If the learner is made to use the new knowledge actively, the learning becomes *deep*. The learner connects the new knowledge to the concepts that s/he already has, and understands how it can be used practically. It is, therefore, much more likely to be remembered and used.
- **Motivation is important for learning**.⁴ What is it that makes people want to learn? Some learn because they want to

do a better job - they get satisfaction from the feeling that they are competent. People are also very strongly motivated by the hope that they will be rewarded - for instance, by gaining a qualification, leading to a promotion and better pay. The need to pass exams is therefore a very strong motivator.

- Learning continues **throughout a person’s lifetime** - at least informally. We all know that health workers should continue to learn throughout their careers, because new information about health is constantly becoming available. However, many workers do not have access to formal in-service training. This means they themselves have to take the responsibility for staying up-to-date - they have to become ‘life-long learners’.

‘Teaching’

Once again, our understanding of what ‘teaching’ is, is based on our past experience. Our earliest experience was in school, where the teacher was also a ‘master’ or ‘mistress’, standing in front of the class, telling us what to do and what to learn. Some of us experienced the same kind of ‘teaching’ at college. Others may have experienced teaching where the ‘teacher’ is more of an equal, who takes account of the learner’s experience and even learns from the learner. That is why Abbatt and McMahon say: ‘Teaching is helping other people to learn’.⁵ They go on to say that the job of ‘teaching’ health care workers has four elements:

1. The teacher has to **decide what students should learn**. The students may take part in this decision, but all are guided by the same principle: **it is the job that people have to do, that determines what they should learn**. They have to learn all the knowledge, skills and attitudes that they need to perform a specific job. They learn what they ‘must know’ and ‘should know’, not what is ‘nice to know’.
2. The teacher has to **help the learners to learn**. This does *not* mean that the teacher ‘spoonfeeds’ the students, as if they were babies. It *does* mean that the teacher’s first concern should be that the students should learn as well as possible. Teaching sessions or classes have to be planned carefully, taking into account the learning styles, the language, the background of the students. In short, the teachers must be **student centred, not teacher centred**.
3. The teacher has to **make sure that the students have learnt** - s/he has to assess

them. Assessment helps teachers and students to see how well the students are progressing, so that they can attend to any weaknesses. It sets a standard, so that society is given people who are competent to practice. **Assessment must be carefully planned so that it supports the learning we want to see-** we know that students learn what they believe they need to pass the exams, and leave out the rest . . .

4. The teacher has to *look after the welfare of her/ his students*. Students who

are stressed and unhappy do not learn well. Good teachers try to ensure that the general living conditions and environment of their students are adequate. They also provide opportunities for personal counselling for them. **Teachers need to cultivate an open and trusting relationship with their students.**

In the next article in this series we will start applying these ideas and principles, by considering ‘Communication and Effective Teaching’. Stay with us!

References

1 Stones E. *An introduction to educational psychology*, London: Methuen, 1966; 50–1.
2 Harris D, Bell C. *Evaluating and assessing for learning*, London: Kogan Page, 1986: 118–26.
3 Pedler M. ‘Learning in management education’, *Journal of European Training*, 1974; 3 (3): 182–95.
4 Handy C.B. *Understanding organizations*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1976: 31-47.
5 Abbatt F, McMahon R. *Teaching health care workers*, second edition, London: Macmillan, 1993: 15–21.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS USED IN TEACHING		Sue Stevens Nurse Consultant
TERM USED	DEFINITION	
Aims	A general statement of what is intended in a particular lesson or course of study	
Assessment	A means of comparing students’ actual achievement with a desired standard of achievement as outlined in the syllabus	
Brainstorming	A collection of ideas shared in a group encouraging free expression	
Buzz group	Discussion in groups of 2–4 people	
Case study****	Text description to facilitate imagination and discussion of a possible situation	
Course design	The systematic planning of a period of study for a particular group of students	
Curriculum planning	A plan worked out in advance fixing the order or the timetable of a group of educational activities for a particular course - aims, content, methods, evaluation	
Demonstration	Teacher activity – e.g., to teach a practical skill or why certain outcomes occur	
Directed private study	Time set aside by the teacher for students to study a particular subject	
Evaluation	The process of reviewing particular areas of study to estimate their effectiveness according to student needs and any changing factors	
Exposition	An interrupted lecture where the teacher will stop to answer a question or explain further	
Feedback	Information received by the teacher about the success of, or problems experienced with, a session or course as it is progressing	
Learning objectives/outcomes	Specific statements of behaviour by a student after a period of learning – proving they have learned	
Learning strategies/ teaching methods	Activities chosen by the teacher to help students learn	
Lecture	Subject introduced and delivered by the teacher in a specific time which transmits information	
Lesson plan	A ‘sketch map’ of a particular session for a particular group of students, based on objectives and teaching methods with intended timing of activities	
Practical	Student activity – e.g., learning a skill or group work	
Programmed learning	A planned exercise to enable individual learning, e.g., in a manual or a computer programme	
Project	A task based on investigation with a specific time-table. The teacher will advise the student on resources and materials. The student reports back with findings, usually in written format	
Resources	(a) Any source of information from which students are able to learn, e.g., library, teaching materials, human resources (other students, teachers, etc.). All these are referred to as ‘learning resources’	
	(b) Funding, staffing, equipment – anything required to run a course	
Role play ****	Similar to case study (see above). A situation is acted out to create insight into students own behaviour	
Scheme of work	A session by session plan addressing a specific topic for a particular group of students which includes objectives, methods, content, resources, and assessment procedures. Based on a syllabus	
Seminar	A group of about 8 –12 people following up something that has already been introduced on the course. Involves reading of an essay or paper by one group member followed by discussion	
Simulation****	Similar to a case study and role play (see above)	
Syllabus	A statement of aims and content for subject areas	
Syndicate work	A task given by the teacher to a group of students to complete in a period of time. The students are required to report back to the teacher	
Tutorial	One-to-one teaching (student and teacher) usually for counselling purposes based on the student’s work	
Weighting	The emphasis, in terms of time and the allocation of marks in assessment, placed on an area of study in comparison with other areas of study	